

Daniel Smith – 'Radical Populism: A New Pragmatic Revolt in Politics' Abstract

Pragmatism is a philosophical movement that originated in the United States around 1870 which argues that truth can be determined by focusing on the practical consequences of actions or ideas rather than through abstract epistemological concepts. In 1928, W.Y. Elliott proposed in his book, 'The Pragmatic Revolt in Politics,' that the success of fascist movements in seizing power was a reaction to weak constitutional governments, and was therefore a 'pragmatic' means of taking political power in the face of the failures of contemporary states rather than an expression of nationalism, as others claimed. In this paper I will utilize his theory to analyze the recent electoral success of left- and right-wing populist parties in Europe and the United States, as it sheds light on current trends in politics that can seem unrelated when considered through an ideological lens. As the effects of economic turmoil alienate Grecian and American alike, new political factions have been able to take power on a wave of voter discontent and anti-establishment rhetoric. This change in electoral politics offers another 'pragmatic revolt in politics', as conceived by Elliott. The differences between the American Tea Party and the new Radical Left of Spain and Greece are great, but both have employed similar rhetoric characteristic of previous populist movements. I contend that a pragmatic revolt is occurring today, but through democratic means. Such a revolt is pragmatic in nature; the means (populist rhetoric employed to win election) are the best ways for a new political faction to gain office and seize power, regardless of the faction's political agenda. Interpreting this ongoing change in electoral politics as pragmatic enables an understanding of the rhetoric used by populist actors no matter their ideological views and of how it can be deployed by opportunistic political actors in the future.